

New Covenant Sacrifices

a sermon in the series
Hebrews: An Epistle of Encouragement

A sermon delivered Sunday Evening, February 10, 2002
at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.

by S. Michael Durham
© 2002 Real Truth Matters

Hebrews 13:15-16

By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of [our] lips giving thanks to his name. 16 But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.

We continue to study and heed the list of exhortations the writer of Hebrews gives in the final chapter of this great book. We have learned how to be both a loving and a faithful church. Today we will again find practical instruction. I want to remind you that all that we are learning from this chapter is built upon what the writer said in the previous twelve chapters. Today this will be more obvious than on the two previous Sundays.

One of the themes of the book of Hebrews is the clear pronouncement that the New Covenant had come and replaced the Old Covenant. This New Covenant is much superior to the Old. It has a better High Priest; a better atoning sacrifice. The New Covenant had a better promise, and a better altar, as well as a better tabernacle. In all respects it is superior to the Old. Now, I do not want you to think that there is a complete break or discontinuity between the covenants. The New Covenant is not a continuation of the Old in a new form or administration. The Old Covenant or Mosaic Law was a shadow or type of the New Covenant, and it was built on a different set of promises and guarantees. The New Covenant is built upon better promises, therefore it is not a continuation of the Old Covenant. Yet, that does not mean that there is no continuity between them. There are similarities. The reason for such similarities is that the Old Covenant was a picture or type of the New Covenant. Therefore, what you see in pictures or types in the Old, you now see in reality in the New. The writer of Hebrews shows us this today in our text as he discusses the word “sacrifices” and shows us how the Old Covenant sacrifices were only foreshadowings of New Covenant realities.

WORSHIP CAN ONLY COME THROUGH CHRIST

By Him...

It may seem peculiar to say that sacrifices are to be continually offered in the New Testament. But that is exactly what our author is stating. The Old Testament sacrifices were only shadows,

types, and pictures of the real New Covenant sacrifices that are to be offered by us today. In these two verses the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews centers his discussion upon worship. He writes to Jews who were part of a religious system of sacrifices, rites, and rituals that worshiped the Lord God. All of the rules and regulations concerning animal sacrifices were about worship. It was how those under the Old Covenant worshipped. Now we have a New Covenant built upon a different promise and a different oath. It is founded on a better sacrifice, a better tabernacle, not made with hands but made in Heaven. That tabernacle is Jesus Christ. Jesus is also the new Lawgiver of the New Covenant and He is the high priest of this same covenant. He has instituted a spiritual form of worship. This is the whole debate in John chapter four between the woman at the well and Jesus. Her question to the Lord was “Where do we worship?” Up to the time of the coming of the Son of Man worship had been restricted to a place, the temple in Jerusalem. It was limited to a physical temple and the sacrifices were physical. The woman at the well, being a Samaritan, believed that worship was to take place on Mt. Gerizim in Samaria. The question was either to fuel a many-century-old debate or she was sincere in her quest to know what proper worship was. Jesus’ profound New Covenant answer was neither place. Neither, because He was going to institute a form of worship that is not located in physical temples or animal sacrifices. New Covenant worship is “in Spirit and truth.” Worship under the New Covenant is not restricted to a specific locality as it was under the Old Covenant.

I believe there are several things our author is saying in these two verses about our New Covenant worship. First, he says in verse fifteen that worship can only come through Christ. He says, “by Him.” Worship that is in “spirit and truth” is only “by” or “through” Christ. How shall we interpret these two words, “by Him”? Undoubtedly, he is meaning that because of what Jesus did we can worship the Father in spirit and in truth. What has our Lord done? Well, you have to go back to the beginning of man’s history and see that man has rebelled against God. What else can you call it but an evil and sadistic rebellion, that man, the created, refused to submit to the Creator? If that is not evil and rebellion then nothing else is. The thing formed said to the one who formed it, “Why have you made me thus? I will not submit to your will.” So man rejected God’s leadership. What was God’s response? Find God’s response and you will discover what Jesus did.

The Bible tells us the creative Word became flesh. God became like the thing He formed. He was made like a rebel and yet He was not rebellious. For the love of man and because of man’s rejection of heaven’s riches, God the Christ became poor. He rejected heaven’s riches that He might endure earth’s poverty. What an identification of love! The Lord Jesus so identified with this that He became one of us. Now, my friends, if He had done nothing else, in this we have enough reason to worship Him. But it doesn’t stop there. He moved through heaven’s holy halls and because of the sweetest love ever known, purity became incarnate and infiltrated the depths of mankind’s corruption. Think of it, the constant grief that must have been our Lord’s as corruption and filth encircled Him at all times. He who was totally, perfectly pure had to be associated with such sin. Ah, if there was nothing more to this demonstration of love, we have enough to worship Him.

But there is more. Will we forget that His ears had always heard the sweet chorus of angels hailing Him as king? But holy love subjected Him to man's chorus of hate mocking him as a king. For this act alone we have enough to worship Him, but there is more. He pursued death as one who would pursue a prize or treasure. He suffered as one who deserved the worst pain justice could administer and yet He was innocent.

*Died he for me who caused His pain?
For me who Him to death pursued.
Amazing love how can it be that thou my
God should die for me?*

In our place on Calvary's cross Christ suffered the penalty of my sin, and the wrath of God was poured out on Him as a propitiation, a sacrifice that satisfied the holy justice of God so that God could look at me, the rebel, and say, "Go free, righteous one." Is this not sufficient reason today for us to worship? How hard must our hearts be to this truth! We, who have been delivered by His blood and made to know God's presence, hear this story, as I have recounted it to you, with emotions unaffected. We have become accustomed to it and grown used to it. Oh, dear friends, we should cry out to God to make our hearts sensitive again. We are able to worship in spirit and truth because of this supreme sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly, the author, by using the words "by Him," is proving that we cannot present ourselves to the Father without Christ. No one, no matter his credentials, no matter his virtue, can come before holy God without a mediator. We need an advocate with us as we approach the glassy sea and the throne that rides its tides. He that sits upon the throne is unapproachable. There must be one like Him who can stand faultless before Him. Herein is our dire need, we need someone like God to be by our side presenting us to the Father. There is no way to the Father but "by Him" Jesus, the Christ.

THE OLD TESTAMENT SACRIFICIAL SYSTEM WAS A SYSTEM OF WORSHIP

Let us move to the next words in our text, "offer sacrifices." The writer of Hebrews uses Old Testament sacrificial language. Do not make a mistake, the Old Testament sacrificial system was a system of worship. Little do we look at the Old Testament sacrificial system as a system of worship. Rather we see it a system of brutality. We look at the carnage of animal after animal being slaughtered and their blood poured in appeasement for sin. We do not think of it in the terms of worship, but it was worship. The author of our text goes back to the Old Covenant system of worship, and he uses the same terminology of sacrifice to explain a New Covenant reality.

To understand New Covenant worship you need to understand Old Covenant worship. Old Testament worship had a priesthood whose central responsibility was worship, mainly by animal sacrifices for sin. Every animal that was slain to was to cover sin. This was done as an act of worship. How could the slaughter of an animal as a sacrifice for sin be an act of worship? By it

the one offering the sacrifice acknowledged that God was right in His pronouncement of guilt and condemnation upon the human race. It stated that God was worthy to have an appeasing sacrifice made, that His justice demanded it and it was right to do so. Thus it was an act of declaring God's holy nature.

There were other sacrifices offered in the Old Testament system of worship, offerings such as grain offerings or first fruits which were offered as acts of thanksgiving for God's blessings. There were many other types of animal sacrifices that were not for sin, but were offered as a way of expressing thankfulness. It was the responsibility of the Old Testament priest to conduct worship according to the manner which God had prescribed in the Old Covenant law. The writer of Hebrews has stated all of this in chapters one through twelve, and we have studied this. Now he tells us the priesthood has changed and with it the sacrificial system has changed. In other words, worship has changed.

THE PRIESTHOOD HAS CHANGED AND SO HAS THE SACRIFICIAL SYSTEM

The New Covenant believer has replaced the Levitical priesthood. This is the emphasis of our text. How is this possible? In Hebrews chapter seven and verses eleven and twelve he says,

If therefore perfection were by the Levitical priesthood, (for under it the people received the law,) what further need [was there] that another priest should rise after the order of Melchisedec, and not be called after the order of Aaron? For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law.

The priesthood changed with Christ. No longer are the sons of Aaron the high priest. Now one from the tribe of Judah, having no beginning and no end, and after the order of Melchizedek has been established as the new high priest. The author's argument is that if the priesthood has changed from the tribe of Levi to another then the law that established Aaron's sons as priests has also been changed. The change was not a change in the Old Covenant law but an abolishing of the entire law.

The new priest is Jesus Christ, and in First Peter chapter two verse five we read these words, "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood." You, as a part of the church, are a priesthood. Now what is your responsibility as a New Covenant priest? The very same thing it was in the Old Testament. In fact, Peter says the same thing. "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). This is our responsibility as a New Testament priest, to offer up sacrifices to the Lord, not animal sacrifices but spiritual. The priesthood has changed and the sacrifices have changed, but worship has not. Worship is still to be directed to the Lord God and sacrifices are to be made to Him. What are our sacrifices? What are the New Covenant priest's sacrifices? Number one, our text says it is praise. He says in verse fifteen

By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise.

The sacrifice of the New Covenant is worship; it is to declare God in His greatness, that He is holy and worthy of such praise and honor. This worship is to come from the heart. Now you may ask where does it say this in our text? You may cite to me from the text that the praise is to be the fruit of our lips, “let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually that is the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.” There is no mention of the word “heart.” But I wish for you to see that such fruit cannot and does not grow of itself or by itself. It is always the product of the tree or the vine from which it grows. Praise is a product of the heart, a heart that is in love with Christ. Worship that doesn’t come from the heart is a strange sacrifice to God. It is an abomination to God. Jesus said, “This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with [their] lips; but their heart is far from me” (Matthew 15:8).

To join in worship, sing the songs of praise, and have one’s mind preoccupied with something else other than the Lord Jesus Christ is a strange sacrifice. It is an unacceptable sacrifice. Dares not the priest in the Old Testament offer to God anything strange that was not prescribed by the Lord in the law, and dare we not. Dear friend, worship must be from the heart. The fruit of the lips means nothing if it is not from our hearts. I believe it is a great sin for us to come and assemble here and to sing the songs of Zion and have our hearts somewhere else. It is a blasphemy to the living God to exalt His name with our lips if our minds and our hearts not be involved. Nor can you say, “Well, I will not sing anymore if there is a chance that I may be offering a strange sacrifice.” You are a priest to God. It is your responsibility and there are no priests without the necessary sacrifices and offerings.

Let us notice that the text does say it must come out of the mouth. The sacrifice is to be the fruit of the lips; it is born and grows by the power of love in the heart but it manifests itself as fruit of the lips; it must come from the mouth. There is no such thing as praise that is acceptable to God that remains quiet. It didn’t say that it couldn’t be quiet; I said it couldn’t remain quiet. In Psalms sixty-three and verse five, notice that the lips are involved with worship and praise. “My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness and my mouth shall praise thee with joyful lips.”

That is the sacrifice of a New Testament priest, the fruit of the lips. This would include singing hymns and spiritual songs as we find in Ephesians 5:19, “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” More fruit of the lips is also found in Psalm 47:1 “O clap your hands, all ye people; shout unto God with the voice of triumph.” This is not a suggestion from one who subscribes to Pentecostal or Charismatic dogma. It is biblical to shout. It is a fruit of the lips. You say, “Well, it seems so undignified to shout to God. Why are we told to shout?” The answer is God is worthy of full devotion, commitment, and adoration.

It is not saying shout for the sake of shouting. We cannot afford pandemonium, and worship is to be in the spirit of order and decency. But there are times when God cannot be adored in silence. We don’t want shouters, but adorers. Oh, that we would be a people who are so full of God that

we cannot keep ourselves quiet. It is the fruit of the lips because something has been growing in the believer, it is not mechanical, it is not something we do because it is Sunday morning. We do it because all week long it is growing; it is growing and now we come together and the fruit is ripe. Shout unto the Lord! Why, dear friend, when God comes to get us, He is going to shout. He is going to shout over us because of His happiness in gathering His bride unto Himself. Oh, how the bride ought to be happy about the Bridegroom.

Now, dear friend, these are some of the sacrifices that you and I are to be busy offering. How often does the writer say we ought to be doing this? Sunday morning? Sunday Night? Is it three times a week and the sacrificial quotas are fulfilled? No! These sacrifices are to be offered continually, not only when we are gathered here but also while we are separated, living life as it comes to us. In your devotional time there ought to be singing, there ought to be sometimes when you just can't keep quiet and you shout.

Another New Covenant sacrifice is stated in verse sixteen

But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased (Hebrews 13:16).

The word "communicate," like the word "conversation" in last week's text, does not have anything to do with speech. It really means to share. In other words, loving action is the second sacrifice of a New Covenant priest. We are "to do good and to share" one with another. In James chapter one verse twenty-seven James says the exact same thing. "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world."

Would you notice with me what is not mentioned here in the naming of the sacrifices of a New Covenant priest. Did you notice there was no mentioning of large church rolls as a sacrifice that is pleasing to God, nor dynamic youth programs, nor efficient preschool ministries, nor even successful soul winning programs? Everything we cherish, as modern churchgoers today, is not found on this list. What is the sacrifice God is looking for? It is loving one another and demonstrating that love in actions. When you take a meal to someone that needs it, you are offering a sacrifice more significant than a bull or goat in the Old Testament. I should emphasize this and thus I say again, it is more important than the animal sacrifices of the Old Covenant. The animal sacrifices of the Old Covenant were only shadows and types of this New Covenant sacrifices.

When you care for the children of someone who is too ill to do so, you have just committed a sacrifice that God finds a well pleasing aroma. When you give of your own possessions to someone who is in need, you have blessed the Lord your God in worship as much as a shout or a song. It is a sacrifice that God finds pleasing. The writer of Hebrews is continuing the theme of this chapter and its practical instruction—"let brotherly love continue." Brotherly love is a sacrifice. But the word "sacrifice" bothers many because it sounds like something you don't want to do, but you do it anyway. Others criticize this concept as a "works religion." But that is not what

the author of this epistle means by the word “sacrifice.” He uses the word “sacrifice” as it was to be viewed in the Old Testament sacrificial system—as worship. The word “sacrifice” means worship. It is something we offer to God as a means of saying that God is worth it; that He is more valuable than things we count precious and valuable to us.

The thing in which we must be careful as New Testament priests is not to make the mistake of offering our sacrifices with strange fire. Now what is strange fire? It is worshipping God in a way He has not ordained or prescribed. We must remember Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron. In Leviticus chapter ten and verse one we read “And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the LORD, which he commanded them not.” They did not follow the prescription that God had given for worship. They created strange incense and burnt strange fire, which was a fire not from the altar that God had lit from fire from heaven. It was a fire they had made and had kindled. God’s response is in verse two of Leviticus ten, “And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord.” We must be very careful as New Testament priests not to offer anything does not fit the mold of biblical worship. Which leads to the question, what would be strange fire for us?

I think I have stated it already and that is to offer a worship with our lips but our hearts be not involved. To offer worship with an impure heart, knowingly living in sin and still worshipping the Lord, is strange fire to God. Dear friend, if you claim to be God’s child and have joined in the worship of God but have not in truth given God your heart, then you have done no better than Nadab or Abihu. You have kindled a strange fire to God. It is not coming from a pure heart; it is not by Jesus Christ. Many think that God will not do today what He did to Ananias and Sapphira, but I am telling you, do not underestimate God. It has happened more than we think it has. It may have not happened so dramatically, but it happens now and then. God is a holy God who will not tolerate strange incense, fire, or sacrifices.

But God be thanked that through Jesus Christ what we offer God, though it seems little to us, is found acceptable to Him. What may seem meager and not worthy to be offered in light of His glorious majesty is, through Christ, holy and a sweet smelling aroma. It is through Christ that our tainted offerings are made acceptable. Now these are our New Covenant sacrifices. I say now that we know our job as holy priests, let us be busy about the worship of God with the sacrifices that He finds acceptable—praise and loving actions to others. Amen.